

CHAMPION: AN OPERA IN JAZZ OPERA SYNOPSIS
(Terence Blanchard, composer; Michael Cristofer, librettist)

ACT I

In his apartment on Long Island in the present day, Emile Griffith struggles to dress himself, suffering from dementia and confused. Luis, his adopted son, and caretaker, helps him get ready for an important meeting, and Emile's memories intensify...

In the 1950s on the island of St. Thomas, Emile is a young man who dreams of reuniting with his mother, Emelda, and becoming a hat maker. He moves to New York City and finds her, and though she doesn't recognize him, she is overjoyed to reunite with one of the children she left behind. She brings him to meet Howie Albert, a hat manufacturer, hoping to find Emile work. Howie sizes up Emile and immediately recognizes his potential as a boxer. He offers to train him as a welterweight, and Emile quickly develops his natural talent and physique, as Emelda urges him to give up his other dreams. But Emile is lonely and struggles with his identity. He goes to a gay bar in Manhattan and meets Kathy, the owner, who welcomes him into an exciting but scary new community. Emile opens up to Kathy about his childhood and the cruelty he experienced from a fundamentalist relative.

In 1962, Emile is set to fight Benny "Kid" Paret in a high-profile match. When they face off at weigh-in, Paret taunts Emile, calling him "maricon," a Spanish slur for homosexuals. Emile is furious, and they nearly come to blows right there. Howie pulls him away, but when Emile begins to explain why the insult hit so close to home, Howie refuses to have the conversation, telling him that the boxing world is not a place where he can be open about his sexuality. Alone, Emile wrestles with his sense of manhood and self. The fight begins and quickly becomes heated. Paret continues to mock him, and as the fight escalates, Emile delivers seventeen blows in seven seconds. Paret collapses, falls into a coma, and later dies.

ACT II

Back in the present day, lost in his memories, Emile thinks that he sees Paret and speaks with him. Luis reorients him and reminds him that today, they will go to meet Paret's son.

As the 1960s continue, Emile amasses more wins, more fame, and more notoriety, but internally, he is haunted by memories of Paret and grapples with his identity. He marries a woman named Sadie, going against the advice of Howie and Emelda. In the 1970s, however, his luck changes. He is on a losing streak and starting to show signs of "boxer's brain" due to chronic traumatic brain injury. Emile rejects the support of his family and Howie, returning to Kathy's bar, where he is brutally beaten by a group of bigots.

In the present, overcome with memories of the attack, Emile becomes agitated and confused; Luis calms him, reminding him all of that is in the past. They go to meet Kid Paret's son, Benny Paret, Jr., and Luis tells Benny about Emile's condition. Emile expresses regret and asks Benny for his forgiveness, as voices from Emile's past intensify and crescendo in his mind.

Luis takes Emile back home. Alone once more, Emile's memories recede and hush.

Synopsis courtesy of Boston Lyric Opera.